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### **Bioethics Goes China. The 'Second Sino-German Interdisciplinary Symposium about Medical Ethics in China: Medical Ethics in Clinical Medicine, Medical Theory and Research, and in Medical Education'**

Shanghai, 19.-23. Oktober 1999

*Bioethics*, the popular abbreviation of *Biomedical Ethics*, refers to ethical questions associated with the impact of biotechnological innovation on medicine and society. It is not an utterly new research field, but concerned with the intricate puzzles created by traditional medical theory and practice, in combination with the risks and chances brought about by the technological and commercial reconfigurations of medicine and health care systems of our days. As such, Bioethics is a necessary issue in all modernizing and globalizing societies. There is no doubt whatsoever as to the fact that global Bioethics is currently dominated by the US-American debates, followed by the less broadly received European contributions. Until recently, it has been hard to find any voice from China amongst this mainstream, so that even Chinese philosophers and biomedical scientists were tempted to watch westward for ethical insight in this field, and regarded Bioethics as an essentially "Western" issue. In this light, it seemed to be a matter of adopting Western standards, leaving original Chinese approaches to Bioethics something unheard of.

From October 19 to 23, 1999, the campus of the Second Medical University at Shanghai (SSMU) was the venue of the 'Second Sino-German Interdisciplinary Symposium about Medical Ethics in China: Medical Ethics in Clinical Medicine, Medical Theory and Research, and in Medical Education'. The Shanghai Symposium was jointly organized by Chen Renbiao of the SSMU and Ole Döring of the Institute of Asian Affairs, Hamburg. Provided with substantial grants from the Dr. Helmut Storz Foundation (Essen) and the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation (Berlin), and funds from the SSMU, the Chinese Human Genome Southern Research Center at Shanghai, and the Chinese National Natural Science Foundation, this conference assembled some 65 scholars from Germany, USA, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC. It was organized in the spirit of the Hamburg Symposium which had initiated this course of academic exchange the previous year.<sup>1</sup>

For those who do not feel comfortable about the current state of Bioethics in general, and about the Chinese situation in particular, the Shanghai Symposium probably has some good news. Five days of intense debate indicated that a Chinese Bioethics is now in its constitutive stage, with a clear focus on generating particular Chinese approaches to Bioethics. Calling it a Chinese venture is not to say that the debate was dominated by relativistic or nationalistic traits. To the contrary, international aid and cooperation on all levels were welcomed, as long as they would be

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1 C.f. Ole Döring, "Symposium über die Entwicklung der Medizinethik in China: Hamburg, 9.-12. April 1998", *ASIEN*, (Oktober 1998) 69:59-61.

seriously interested in the real situation of the Chinese people. Unlikely as it may appear, topics such as prostitution, homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, population policy, and abortion in China were discussed openly, controversially and with an aim of understanding and constructive criticism. The discussion remained within the realm of reason and fair arguments, and had no interest in ideology of any kind, but was dedicated to finding out what health care means for China, and how medicine should function ethically. In this regard, this symposium provided evidence for the assumption that the preliminary political wisdom (as far as it affects Shanghai) allows for outspokenly critical positions, even in political terms, as long as their scope and company remain scientific.

Now, here are some sad news as well. After all, the whole symposium remained an academic venture, largely isolated from public interest, and with no obvious effect on neither population policy nor legislation in one of the related fields of medicine and social regulations. Although administrators regard the growing interest in ethics with a certain kindness and curiosity, no regular structures for independent bioethical monitoring are in sight. And, as long as education in China is shaped more according to behaviouristic models and party order than by encouragement of individual talents, the official cry for greater creativity and responsibility, basic for ethical understanding, is bound to futility. Inasmuch as the naturally corresponding virtues, such as criticism and civil courage, are defamed and suppressed, the prospects for a Chinese Bioethics deserving its name are poor. Here, the future lies among the freshmen in medical ethics, a few students who were admitted to participate. At least, some seniors of the academic establishment were forthcoming enough to lend their ears.

One of the immediate results of the Shanghai Symposium was the inauguration of an International Ethics Committee, installed at the Chinese Human Genome Southern Research Center at Shanghai, as part of the conference activities. Joining four distinguished scholars from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, three professors from overseas were also appointed, namely Dorothy Wertz (Waltham/Mass.), Paul U. Unschuld (Munich), and Hans-Martin Sass (Bochum / Georgetown). Although the details of their assignment and the related competence beyond honor remain vague to date, it is the first time in the history of Bioethics that foreigners are invited to function as advisors by an official Chinese body.

By and large, the overall outcome of the Shanghai Symposium may be encouraging. The organizers confided that the very fact of its completion as a Sino-German joint venture justifies the success label. It should be regarded nothing more or less than a milestone, however understated this claim seems to be for those who feel uncomfortable about the Bioethics situation in China and worldwide.

Ole Döring